

# Social engineering

## Conference teaches future engineers to put skills to good use



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ENGINEERING4SOCIETY.ORG

The University of Leuven (KU Leuven) and the Geel campus of Thomas More University College are working together to introduce engineers to the social enterprise sector.

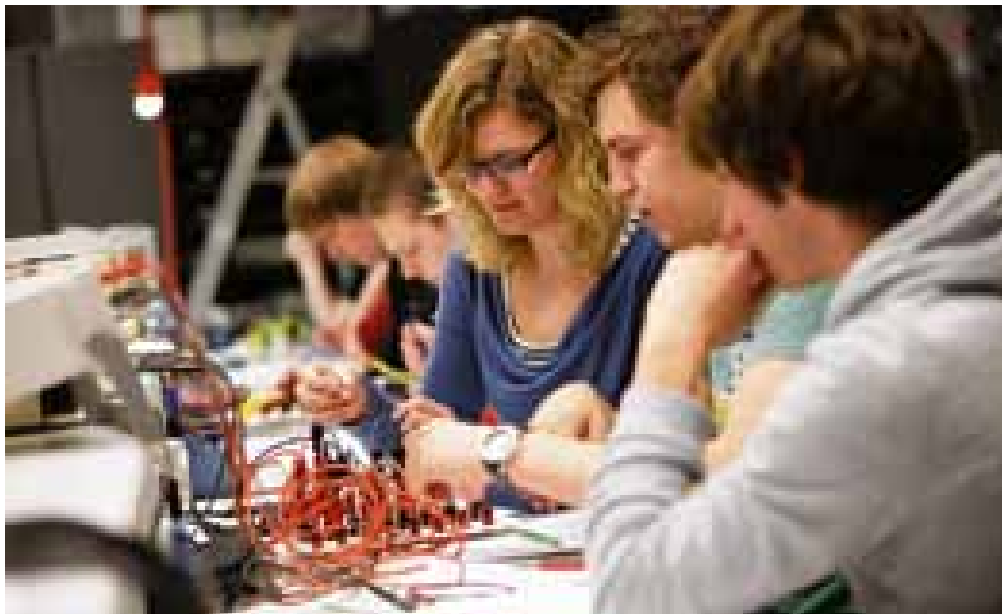
On 18 and 19 June, engineers from all over the world will gather at the historical buildings of the Groot Begijnhof in Leuven for the first Engineering4Society conference. The 30-odd speakers will demonstrate how valuable the work of engineers can be in various social enterprises.

Engineers can provide solutions for problems such as climate change, poverty, disability, exclusion and addiction. A speaker from Ghana, for instance, will talk about an initiative to recycle electronic waste, while KU Leuven architecture professor Ann Heylighen will emphasise how important it is to consider the needs of people with disabilities when designing a building. "Unfortunately, many engineering graduates have no idea how the social enterprise sector works because they never learned about it during their studies," says KU Leuven professor Jan Engelen, one of the organisers of the conference.

“We have to make it clear that many engineers devote their efforts to a good cause

The event includes inspiring examples from abroad, like lectures on designing for the homeless as part of the product and industrial design Master's degree at the University of Porto in Portugal.

KU Leuven has set up a pioneering initiative with the Geel campus of Thomas More University College: a postgraduate programme on community service engineering. The English-language programme, which was organised for the first time this academic year, prepares engineers for a career in the international social sector. Lecturers include representatives of vulnerable



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Students at KU Leuven, where a new programme prepares engineers for a career in the social sector

groups in society, staff of social enterprise organisations and policymakers. "Students can learn about the diversity of social enterprise initiatives," explains Engelen. "They also get to know the financial organisation of the sector, which relies to a large extent on attracting subsidies." Students are also taught how to involve the necessary stakeholders to make sure that projects meet the demands of the target group. "This is a skill that many graduate engineers now lack," says Engelen.

The first graduates of the programme will present their theses at the Engineering4Society conference. Sonia Van Ballaert, for example, will explain how the use of online platforms like social media can help to motivate volunteers working on suicide prevention hotlines. Annemie Morel will explain how the memory of people with dementia can be stimulated by linking objects to important aspects of their lives. For example, a chair for a visitor can be equipped with technology that starts playing a video message from a grandchild when the person with dementia holds a tablet computer near the chair.

A separate postgraduate programme is a step in the right direction for Flemish education, but the big challenge is to adjust the curricula of the

regular engineering degrees. "A separate course on community service engineering is a goal in the long term, but social profit aspects could be integrated into the current courses quickly," explains Engelen.

Informatics courses could include an explanation on making web pages accessible for people with a reading disability, and economics courses could provide more information about the non-profit sector. Encouraging students to work on social projects for their practical assignments would help as well.

The Geel campus of Thomas More University College already gives students the chance to follow extra courses on how the social enterprise sector works. The additional efforts of students are rewarded through a special mention on their diploma.

According to Engelen, an increased focus on social enterprises can make the profession of engineer more intriguing, which is necessary, he says, because there is a shortage of engineers on the labour market.

"Many youngsters have trouble understanding what engineers do exactly and have a somewhat negative view of the profession," says Engelen. "We have to make it clear that many engineers devote their efforts to good causes."

## Students seek host families across language border

\ WEPBE

Exchange organisation WEP is looking for 14 Flemish families to host a student from Wallonia in September. The youngsters, aged 15 to 18, will go to a local school to practise their Dutch and learn more about Flemish culture.

WEP stands for World Education Program, a Belgian organisation founded in 1988 that has grown to have offices in France, Italy, Argentina and Australia. "We organise language travels, put people in touch with charity organisations all over the world and work with exchange students," explains WEP's Dominique Trocmé. "Every year, we find a place for foreign students who want to come to Belgium and help about 2,500 Belgian students with an educational or cultural programme abroad."

For the past 10 years, WEP has been setting up exchange programmes between students from Wallonia and Flanders. It might seem a bit strange to arrange exchange programmes within their own country, but it's a fun way for



the French speakers to practise their Dutch.

"It's a cliché that French-speaking students don't want to learn Dutch; they do," Trocmé says. "For those who want to practise their second language in Flanders and live with a Flemish family, we try to find a secondary school and a host family they can join for a period from a trimester up to a year."

About 20 students from Wallonia have signed

up for the programme, most of them in their last year at secondary school. WEP is still looking for 14 families who want to invite one of them into their home.

"A young couple with or without children, pensioners, a single mother: Anyone can volunteer as long as they have a spare room and don't mind putting an extra plate on the table," Trocmé says. "Our local co-ordinators screen the host families and stay in close touch throughout the entire stay."

And how about the schools? "If the student joins a family with children of a similar age, we try to send them all to the same school," he explains. "So far, we've always been successful in finding a place for the students at one of the local schools. Most of the schools know our organisation and see the benefits of such an exchange."

WEP also organises similar exchanges for Flemish students who want to brush up their French in Wallonia. \ Katrien Lindemans

## WEEK IN EDUCATION

### Agreement to promote airplane tech studies

Three Flemish secondary schools and representatives of the local aviation sector have signed a commitment agreement to strengthen the studies in airplane-related technology. The schools preparing youngsters for a technical job in the aviation sector are the Stedelijk Lyceum Meir in Antwerp, VTI Sint-Petrus and Paulus in Ostend and Zavo in Zaventem. With the skills acquired, graduates can find work at companies manufacturing airplane parts or as technicians with airlines. The three schools combined have only 70 students enrolled in these studies this academic year, so the sector is hoping the agreement will improve the figure.

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### VUB launches chair on flexible careers

The Free University of Brussels (VUB) has launched a chair to stimulate the discussion and concentrate on research on flexible career trajectories. Mainstreaming the idea of flexibility in one's long-term job prospects can help reduce the ever-growing number of burnouts, according to the chair's co-ordinator, communication scientist Tanja Verheyen. According to a VUB statement, there is still a taboo in Belgium around career changes, although the need for them is more acute than ever. "The time of employees working for decades in the same place and in the same position is long gone," said the university. Verheyen pointed to two crucial developments: the ageing of the population and the increasing use of robotic technology. More and more jobs will no longer be carried out by humans but by digital systems, she explained.

### Record diplomas via Exams Commission

A record number of 936 students last year earned their secondary school diploma via the Exams Commission. That is 38% more than the year before. Some 8,000 youngsters left secondary school last year without a diploma. Increasing numbers of them are turning to Flanders' Exams Commission, which administers courses of study and diplomas equal to secondary school diplomas. Nearly 3,660 people registered with the Exams Commission last year, and a record number of 936 passed the exams. Half of these earned a diploma of professional education (BSO), about one-quarter in technical education (TSO) and another quarter in general education (ASO). \ Andy Furniere